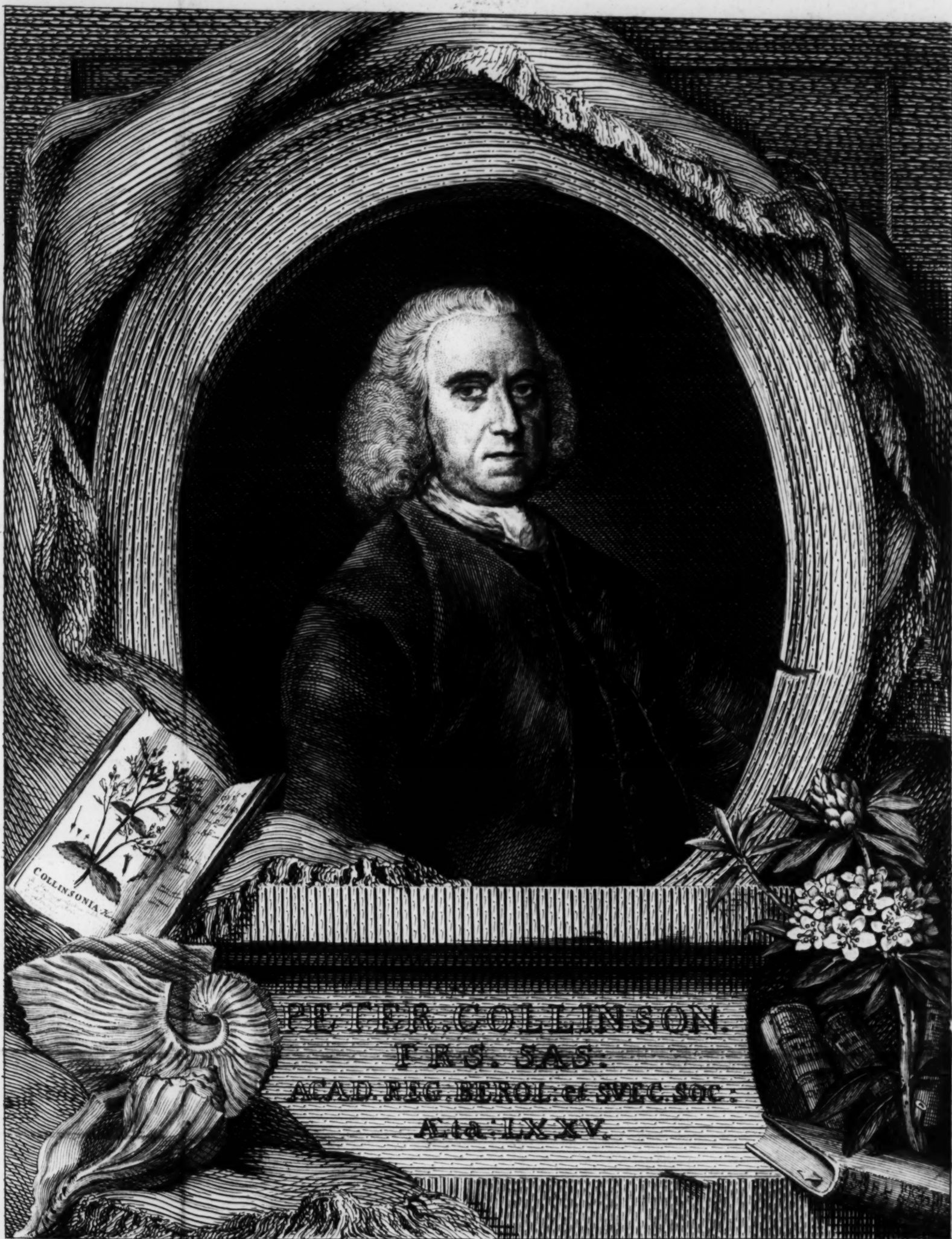




PETER COLLINSON.
F.R.S. SAS.
ACAD. REG. BEROL. & SVET. SOC.
A. 12. LX XV.

J. Miller Sculp.

S O M E

A C C O U N T

OF THE LATE

PETER COLLINSON,

Fellow of the ROYAL SOCIETY, and of the SOCIETY of ANTIQUARIES,
in LONDON,

And of the ROYAL SOCIETIES of BERLIN and UPSAL.

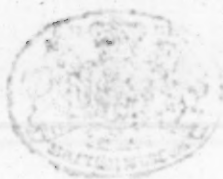
In a LETTER to a Friend.

LONDON:

PRINTED IN THE YEAR

MDCC LXX.

ob. 1768



To * * * *

I KNOW not, my dear friend, that I ever wished for leisure, and the talent of Biography, more than at present : I could employ both these in a manner that would be pleasing to myself, and perhaps at the same time useful to the public, in placing before it an example worthy of being recorded, because highly worthy of imitation. The satisfaction arising from the view of a life continually employed in commendable pursuits, and in acts of lasting and extensive utility, is not a small one ; we participate afresh in every social action of the friend whom we loved whilst living, and pay that tribute to his name which love and friendship demand---a grateful and honourable remembrance.

The just esteem which my honoured Friend Peter Collinson had acquired, not only among the chief promoters of natural history, in most parts of 'the world where these studies are cultivated, but amongst men of understanding in general in every part of useful science, will, I persuade myself, render any apology unnecessary for attempting to exhibit some account of the life of this very eminent person.

Our acquaintance commenced about the year 1740; he was then considered amongst the number of those who were best acquainted with botany and natural history in England; his collection in most branches of natural history was very large, and the specimens well-chosen; his botanic garden contained many curious plants, not at that time to be met with in any other; and the number of such kept increasing to the last period of his life.

I owe much of my intimacy with the several branches of natural history to my deceased Friend: scarcely any thing gave him more pleasure than to promote an inclination for such studies, so far as was consistent with his acquaintances situation; for being in business himself, he knew the value of time too well, to endeavour to excite a taste for such researches, where probably it must have been gratified at the expence of discretion, and of those hours which ought to have been devoted to more necessary employment.

The family of the Collinsons is of antient standing in the North : Peter and James were the great grandsons of Peter Collinson, who lived on his paternal estate called Hugal Hall, or Height of Hugal, near Windermere Lake in the parish of Stavely, about ten miles from Kendal in Westmorland. My Friend, whilst a youth, discovered his attachment to natural history : insects, and their several metamorphoses, employed many of those hours, which at his time of life are mostly spent by others in very different pursuits. Plants likewise engaged his attention ; he began early to make a collection of dried specimens, and had access to the best gardens at that time in the neighbourhood of London.

It was a favourable circumstance to himself, that he was in partnership with his brother James Collinson, in a business that did not always require their presence together. They lived in great harmony, and reciprocally afforded to each other opportunities for their respective pursuits. Both, however, had a strong relish for horticulture and planting, and both had acquired a just conception of rural elegance.

He became early acquainted with the first-rate Naturalists of that age ; the Drs. Derham, Woodward, Dale, Lloyd, and, to name all in one, the great Sir Hans Sloane, were amongst his friends. I first saw that amazing collection, now constituting the British Musæum, with my deceased Friend, in company with the late Sir Charles Wager, who
had

had been a most generous and fortunate contributor to that vast treasure of natural curiosities ; omitting nothing, in the course of his many voyages, that could add to its magnificence, and encouraging the commanders under him, who were stationed in different parts of the globe, to procure whatever was rare and valuable in every branch of natural history. To this he was strongly excited by Peter Collinson ; for whom and his family Sir Charles had a very singular esteem, and continued it to the last moments of his life.

Among the great variety of articles which form that superb collection, small was the number of those with whose history my Friend was not well acquainted ; he being one of those few who visited Sir Hans at all times familiarly, and continued so to do to the latest period ; their inclinations and pursuits in respect to natural history being the same, a firm friendship had early been established between them.

Peter Collinson was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society on the 12th of December, 1728 ; and perhaps was one of the most diligent and useful members of that respectable body, not only in supplying them with many curious observations himself, but in promoting and preserving a most extensive correspondence with learned and ingenious Foreigners, in all countries, and on every useful subject ; so that he not only furnished many instructive hints from his own fund of observa-

observations, but excited others to contribute largely to the instruction and entertainment of the Society.

Besides his attention to natural history, he suffered nothing useful, in either art or science, to escape him ; he minuted every striking hint that occurred either in reading or conversation ; and from this source he derived much information, as there were very few men of learning and ingenuity of all professions, who were not of his acquaintance at home, and most foreigners of eminence in natural history, or in arts and sciences, were recommended to his notice and friendship.

His diligence and œconomy of time was such, that though he never appeared to be in a hurry, he maintained an extensive correspondence with great punctuality ; acquainting the learned and ingenious in distant parts of the globe with the discoveries and improvements in natural history in this country, and receiving the like information from the most eminent persons in almost every other. Amongst a variety of circumstances of this kind that might be mentioned, his correspondences with the ingenious Cadwallader Colden, Esq; of New-York, and the justly celebrated Dr. Franklin of Philadelphia, furnish instances of the benefit resulting from his attention to all improvements. From the former of these gentlemen many valuable observations were received ; and the latter communicated his first essays on electricity to my

C

Friend,

Friend, in a series of letters, which were then published, and have been reprinted in a late edition of the Doctor's ingenious discoveries and improvements. Their minds in this respect were congenial, ever intent upon promoting public good; the letter subjoined is a proof of it *.

Perhaps,

* TO MICHAEL COLLINSON, Esq.

DEAR SIR,

Craven-street, Feb. 8, 1770.

UNDERSTANDING that an account of our dear departed Friend Mr. Peter Collinson is intended to be given to the public, I cannot omit expressing my approbation of the design, as the characters of good men are exemplary, and often stimulate the well-disposed to an imitation, beneficial to mankind, and honourable to themselves. And as you may be unacquainted with the following instances of his zeal and usefulness in promoting knowledge, which fell within my observation, I take the liberty of informing you, that in 1730, a Subscription Library being set on foot at Philadelphia, he encouraged the design by making several very valuable presents to it, and procuring others from his friends: and as the Library Company had a considerable sum arising annually, to be laid out in books, and needed a judicious friend in London to transact the business for them, he voluntarily and cheerfully undertook that service, and executed it for more than thirty years successively; assisting in the choice of books, and taking the whole care of collecting and shipping them, without ever charging or accepting any consideration for his trouble. The success of this library (greatly owing to his kind countenance and good advice) encouraged the erecting others in different places on the same plan; and it is supposed there are now upwards of thirty subsisting in the several colonies, which have contributed greatly to the spreading of useful knowledge in that part of the world; the books he recommended being all of that kind, and the catalogue of this first library being much respected and followed by those libraries that succeeded.

During the same time he transmitted to the directors of the library the earliest accounts of every new European improvement in agriculture and the arts, and every

Perhaps, in some future period, the account he procured of the management of sheep in Spain, in respect to their migrations from the mountains to the plains, and their stated returns, published in the Gentleman's Magazine for May and June, 1764, may not be considered among the least of the benefits accruing from his extensive and inquisitive correspondence. When America is better peopled, the mountainous parts more habitable, the plains unloaded of their vast forests, and cultivated, the finest sheep in the world may possibly cover the plains of Carolina, Georgia, and the Florida's in the winter months, and retreat to the mountains as the summer heats increase, and dry up the herbage. We are utter strangers to this kind of œconomy. Probably it might be practised even in this island to advantage, with this difference, that the highest ground should be chosen for the

every philosophical discovery : among which, in 1745, he sent over an account of the new German Experiments in Electricity, together with a glass tube, and some directions for using it, so as to repeat those experiments. This was the first notice I had of that curious subject, which I afterwards prosecuted with some diligence, being encouraged by the friendly reception he gave to the letters I wrote to him upon it. Please to accept this small testimony of mine to his memory, for which I shall ever have the utmost respect; and believe me, with sincere esteem,

Dear Sir,

Your most obedient,

Humble servant,

B. FRANKLIN.

the winter residence of these animals, proper shelter being made for them, and the wetter low lands left for summer.

Views of public benefit to this country, to others, to mankind in general, always suggested to him useful enquiries ; and the public are in possession of many valuable hints, which from time to time he communicated through the channel of the Gentleman's Magazine, and daily papers, sometimes with his name, or initials, but oftener without any signature ; being more solicitous to do good, than to be seen in doing it.

His conversation was chearful, and usefully entertaining, because it was generally turned to some interesting disquisition, or imparting some beneficial information. This rendered his acquaintance much desired by those who had a relish for natural history, or were studious in cultivating rural improvements, and secured him the intimate friendship of some of the most eminent personages in this kingdom, as distinguished by their taste in planting and horticulture, as by their rank and dignity. With some of these he frequently spent a few days at their seats in the neighbourhood of London, imparting many advantageous hints with regard to the improvements they were designing : and indeed many of them were sensible very few were either so able to advise in these respects, or so impartial. Frequent opportunities had furnished extensive observation
and

and experience of the effects of different methods of cultivation ; what soil, what aspect, best suited different plants and trees ; how best to cover incurable defects, how to improve beauties ; and from this general knowledge, derived from repeated remarks, he often prevented young planters from committing capital mistakes, rectified others into which they had been misled by the ignorant and designing, and by such means he prevailed upon many of his friends not only to embark in this rational amusement, but to persevere in it, greatly to their own emolument, and the lasting advantage of their country.

A very frequent observation of my Friend's was, that he thought it a matter of the utmost importance to young people of fortune, that they should be as early as possible initiated into some rational pursuit, and especially into a taste for all kinds of rural improvements. The human mind, he would remark, must have some object in view, some amusements are necessary ; and if virtue and propriety do not engage it, vice and folly will. Let us then turn them to an employ, which at once contributes to their health, their pleasure, and their profit, and secures them from falling into idleness or dissipation, merely for want of better engagements ; let us find them something to do, and they cannot be unhappy, like a multitude of young persons, who are dissipated and corrupt, because, perhaps, those who have been early about them, or were concerned in their education, had

D

not

not the inclination or address to lead them into some innocent, pleasurable, and useful pursuit.

Planting, he used to say, and gardening, supply a fund of entertainment, the most lasting and reasonable of any occupation in this life ; pleasures not to be purchased. The trees which we ourselves have planted, the fruits we have raised, the plants we have cultivated, seem to be like our children, a kind of new creation ; their shade, their taste, their fragrance, and their beauties, affect us with a richer repast than any others. What a pleasing scene, would he observe, lies open to a young man of fortune devoted to such amusements ! Each succeeding year produces new shades, other fruits, fresh beauties, and brings besides most certain profit. To behold the rising groves, barrenness made fertile, our country improved, ourselves made useful and happy, and posterity enriched ! When on this favourite subject, a very natural reflection often escaped him, That he seldom knew a man possessed of a taste for such pleasures, who was not at the same time temperate and virtuous. And indeed he had a right to make the observation ; for he had the satisfaction of reckoning among his most intimate friends, men of the most amiable and unblemished characters in all stations, parties, and distinctions.

Nor was he only employed in promoting this taste amongst his friends, in enlarging their views, correcting and refining
their

their judgment, but also in furnishing them with the means of increasing their plantations ; and it is but doing justice to his memory, to mention that he was the first who introduced the great variety of seeds and shrubs, which are now the principal ornaments of every garden ; and that it was owing to his indefatigable industry, that so many persons of the first distinction are now enabled to behold groves transplanted from the Western continent flourishing so luxuriantly in their several domains, as if they were already become indigenous to Britain.

His business in the mercantile way was chiefly to North America and the West-Indies ; the former particularly. He had perused every performance that was wrote respecting the natural history and produce of all our own settlements, and indeed of all the European colonies in the New World. This enabled him to make enquiries after every thing that was curious and useful, and brought him acquainted with the most intelligent people who came over from America ; his enquiries raised some curiosity in those countries, and excited a taste for natural history, and botanical researches. It perhaps may safely be said, that every thing of this sort that has appeared in those parts of the world, was chiefly owing to his encouragement. That eminent naturalist John Bartram may almost be said to have been created such by my Friend's assistance ; he first recommended the collecting of seeds, and afterwards assisted in disposing of them in this country,

country, and constantly excited him to persevere in investigating the plants of America, which he has executed with indefatigable labour through a long course of years, and with amazing success.

The quantities of new seeds he received from America, not only supplied his own garden with every thing that was curious, but furnished him with the means of procuring others, in exchange, from other parts of the globe. He had some correspondents in almost every nation in Europe; some in Asia, and even at Peking; who all transmitted to him the most valuable seeds they could collect, in return for the treasures of America. In this exchange of good offices, there is abundant cause to believe no man ever exceeded him in respect to punctuality, care, or generosity; few had ever more intelligent correspondents, or succeeded better in enriching this country with the vegetable produce of every other, that could either add to its advantage or ornament. And were I to assert, that he was the means of introducing more new and beautiful plants into Britain than any man of his time, and was inferior to none in his acquaintance with the history of their introduction, I should run little hazard of transgressing the bounds of veracity.

Many anecdotes of this kind he had learned from the ancient botanists, who flourished at his entrance into these studies; and many observations he had likewise made in the
course

course of above half a century. Were such of the former of these as he noted in most of the books of natural history which he left behind him, collected, and the many curious remarks he made on a variety of improving and entertaining subjects, digested and laid before the public, a richer treasure of valuable knowledge can scarcely be offered to it, especially if judicious extracts were added, from the letters of his correspondents.

The great Linnæus, at the time of his residence in England, contracted an intimate friendship with Peter Collinson; which was reciprocally increased by a multitude of good offices, and continued to the last without any diminution.

It was not, however, to Britain only, that his benevolent views were confined; as he took much pains to excite a taste in the Americans for natural history, so he likewise often prompted them to pursue improvements, alike beneficial to themselves and to their mother country. How often have I heard him urge to such of them as visited him, the benefit, nay necessity, of cultivating flax, hemp, wine, silk, and other products? He would press the Virginians to be-think themselves in time of a more permanent staple, than a plant whose consumption only depends on custom and caprice, and this custom daily declining. Vines, said he, will thrive well in your country; but imitate nature in their cultivation; don't keep them close to the ground, as we are

E

forced

forced to do in this and other Northern European climates, for the sake of a little more sun and heat to ripen the grape; your summer heats exceed, as much as ours fall short; allow them, therefore, longer stems; let them be trained to, and supported by trees, and hide their fruit among the foliage, as in the warmer parts of Europe.

We frequently lamented the supineness and inattention of the colonists to their interest in this, as well as many other articles. In most of the Northern and Southern colonies, there are a variety of native grapes, growing wild in the woods, and twining among the trees and bushes for their support; these yield fruit in plenty of different kinds, and many of them capable of producing a rich good wine; how easy would it be in autumn to collect a sufficient quantity of the fruit to make trial of the wine? It has been done by a very few, and with success; the fault seems not so much in the fruit, as want of skill or care in making the wine. I have tasted some very good wine from the wild uncultivated grape, made without much skill, and sent over to England; what would not the same fruit with proper skill and management have produced? It is certainly high time for the Americans to apply themselves with a little more diligence to cultivate their native produce. No person perhaps was more intently solicitous than my Friend, to promote these useful essays, as no person was better acquainted with the natural produce of America; none saw the benefits that
might

might result from them more clearly, nor could suggest more compendious and unexpensive means of procuring them.

Besides his attachment to natural history, he was very conversant in the antiquities of our own country ; many curious remarks, as well as some antient British curiosities, are in the possession of his son. Few persons were better acquainted with the progress of arts, sciences, and manufactures, or improvements of any kind, amongst us, than himself. The antient state, and its gradual advances to the present, was a frequent topic of his enquiry and conversation.

He was a member of the Society of Antiquarians from its first institution, and supplied them often with many curious articles of intelligence and observations, respecting both our own and other countries ; for wherever he was, or however seemingly engaged, nothing at any time escaped his notice, if it appeared likely to be useful or instructive. Why he was not elected one of the curators of the British Museum, was matter of wonder to many of his acquaintance. He was one of the founder's most antient and intimate Friends, a contributor to this collection, acquainted with the subjects, and had done more towards promoting researches into natural history than perhaps most of his contemporaries : but he had no greater ambition than to collect what knowledge he could,
and

and to render this knowledge subservient as much as possible to the good of mankind.

He lived many years in great domestic happiness ; his family took the same bias, and aided his pursuits. Like his own, it was also their amusement ; and being accustomed to the conversation of men acquainted with such subjects, they acquired both knowledge and an attachment to the study of nature.

His person was rather short than tall ; he had a pleasing and social aspect ; of a temper open and communicative, capable of feeling for distress, and ready to relieve and sympathise. He rose very early, and whilst in the country his time was almost continually employed in his garden, observing and assisting the operations of nature, or in the study of other parts of physical knowledge, which contributed to his health and his pleasure.

He was fond of fruit to an extreme, and of flowers a perpetual admirer : he was seldom without them in his house, from the early Snowdrop to the autumn Cyclamen. He would often relate with pleasure the astonishing advancement made in his time in horticulture ; gave instances of many plants, which at their first introduction would not bear our winters without shelter, and now endured almost our hardest frosts ; so that foreigners stood amazed at the
power

power of vegetation in this country, and the happy temperature we enjoy, notwithstanding the unmerited murmurs of the unthinking and injudicious against a climate the most favourable of all others to the real happiness of mankind.

Excepting some attacks of the gout, in general he enjoyed perfect health and great equality of spirits; bearing those trials which are incident to man with fortitude and resignation.

In such a course he arrived at his 75th year; when being on a visit to Lord Petre in Essex, for whom he had a singular regard, he was seized with a total suppression of urine, which baffling every attempt to relieve it, proved fatal on the 11th of August, 1768, and deprived his family, his friends, and country of a man devoted to their interest and advantage. Inclosed in his will was found a paper, importing, “ that
 “ he hoped he should leave behind him a Good Name,
 “ which he valued more than riches; that he had endeavoured not to live uselessly; and that all his days he constantly aimed to be a Friend to Mankind.” Such indeed he was, to the utmost of his ability; and he may justly be considered as a latent spring to many important improvements, as well as one of the principal promoters of natural history in general, and of horticulture in particular, in the age in which he lived.

He has left behind him, besides many curious anecdotes relative to the state of botany, planting, and horticulture in this country, a vast treasure of dried specimens of plants; and in spite of repeated and most cruel depredations made upon his garden, whereby he lost a multitude of valuable and curious plants and shrubs, and had besides very many others destroyed by the villains in the act of plunder, he nevertheless left a small treasure of rare plants in greater perfection perhaps than can be seen in any other spot.

That which I am now, though feebly, attempting to do for him, he often executed for his friends, rescued their names from oblivion, and proposed their virtues to be copied by succeeding generations. The late Dr. Stukely was one; and many others might be mentioned, who have received from his friendly hand the tribute due to their memories.

His friendships were not superficial; he could not see a worthy character drop unheeded into the grave without a wish, nay an endeavour, to perpetuate its remembrance. For my own part, I yet feel that in him I have lost a Friend who valued my happiness little less than his own, and sincerely wish it was in my power to do justice to his memory. Till, however, some person of greater ability and more leisure undertakes the task, I believe his friends will not be dissatisfied with perusing this account of his conduct and conversation.

